

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001940

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: AS ELECTION APPROACHES, AMPARA RESIDENTS ASK:
CAN'T WE ALL JUST GET ALONG?

Classified By: DCM James F. Entwistle. Reason: 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (U) Summary: The district government in the Muslim-majority East coast district of Ampara appears to have logistics for the November 17 presidential election in order. Community members feel that Tamils in the district are not taking the election seriously enough. Tamils are unconvinced that voting will solve their issues but, if they do vote, would overwhelmingly support Ranil Wickremesinghe. Muslims are divided, but interlocutors in Ampara believe that more than half will vote for Mahinda Rajapakse. All want prosperity and peace in the North and East. End Summary.

District Government Ready for Election Day

¶2. (U) Poloff and pol FSN traveled to Ampara on Sri Lanka's eastern coast November 7-9 to assess preparations for the November 17 presidential election. The Ampara government agent (GA) Herath Abeyweera assured poloff that all polling procedures for the presidential election had been finalized and that contingency plans are in place for the two challenges he saw as most threatening to the voting: monsoonal rains and ballot security. Intense rain would render some areas of Ampara inaccessible by car, but the district was prepared to transport people to and from polling stations by tractor, boat, or Air Force-provided helicopters. Abeyweera noted that "safehouses" near the main roads would be available to overnight polling staff in isolated areas if they were to feel threatened in any way, but he emphasized that he did not expect any security issues to arise. (Abeyweera was alluding to political party thugs intent on rigging the election rather than interference by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)). Polling staff are required to man the station the night before the election, making them potentially vulnerable to intimidation.

To Vote or Not To Vote, That Is the Question

¶3. (U) Community members in Ampara town, Akkaraipattu, Kalimunai, and Pottuvil repeatedly told poloff that Tamils and, to a lesser extent, Muslims are not taking the presidential election as seriously as they should. The prevailing attitude among those uninterested in the election is that the government in Colombo has done little to help minorities in the wake of the tsunami, lacks the political will to forge a permanent peace settlement in the country, and the selection of a new Sinhalese president likely would not change the situation. Many interlocutors viewed Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) candidate and current Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse and United National Party (UNP) candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe as two sides of the same coin--interested only in promoting the Sinhalese Buddhist majority. Voters are more interested in replacing Ampara's 12 parliamentary seats (out of 225) with legislators willing to speak out on behalf of the welfare of the minority community and funnel development projects into the district. Several interlocutors said that the district's current representatives are useless puppets of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and by implication the LTTE, but no one could say how parliamentary elections would change this.

¶4. (U) Some Muslim, Tamil, and even Sinhalese community members expressed concern that the lack of interest in the presidential election would backfire. They predicted that a Tamil boycott, whether official or de facto, would give Rajapakse the edge and subject minorities to six years of disenfranchising Sinhalese chauvinist policies. Since the election would determine the development of Sri Lanka for the better part of the next decade, many interlocutors stressed that Tamils should think less about what the government has not done for them in the past and think more about which candidate could offer the best deal for the future.

Tamil Demand Peace, Prosperity, and Rights: A Nod for Ranil

¶5. (U) Tamils in Ampara clearly want improved tsunami aid, permanent peace, an end to politically-motivated abductions and killings, government assistance with economic and agricultural development, and equal rights in employment and

education. Although all of poloff's contacts expressed frustration with the pace of reconstruction and the allocation of funds that seemingly benefits the Sinhalese South over the North and East, each harbored the opinion that the tsunami relief provided thus far would not be a relevant factor in this election. Tamils instead would focus on who is offering the most benefits for the future. Many Tamil interlocutors said Wickremesinghe is the lesser of two evils, given Rajapakse's alliance with the Sinhalese chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

16. (SBU) Representatives from the Peace Forum of Ampara District wondered why the JVP, itself a party born out of militancy, could be allowed to enter mainstream politics but be so blatantly anti-Tamil and opposed to negotiating with the LTTE. Other Tamil voters said that they consider Wickremesinghe more likely to achieve a permanent settlement, improving not only Sinhalese-Tamil relations but also solidifying Tamil-Muslim and Muslim-Sinhalese relations. Residents described a climate of fear in Ampara, citing three killings in the district in the first week of November and several abductions that have taken place since August. Most residents blame the LTTE, but police have been unable to prove the identities or the motivations of the perpetrators.

17. (SBU) Tamil farmers interviewed at the Peace Alliance office in Akkaraipattu believe that Wickremesinghe would help reduce the price of fertilizer and stabilize the price of rice, as promised in his manifesto. (This differs from the view of most Sinhalese farmers elsewhere in the country, who believe that Rajapakse is the man for agricultural benefits.)

Residents of Akkaraipattu, comparing previous UNP presidencies to the current SLFP rule, said they experienced more employment and development activities--including free lunch in schools--under the UNP. They told poloff that the incumbent SLFP president received 86% of the votes in the 1999 presidential election in a Tamil-dominated division in Ampara, but her perceived failure to live up to her promises gives the impetus for Tamils to vote UNP. Other Tamils at the Peace Alliance and at the Maha Shakthi Foundation expressed hope that Wickremesinghe would end standardization--a quota system that restricts the number of Tamils admitted to universities--and discriminatory hiring practices. A Peace Forum representative told poloff that over 70% of employed university graduates in the district are Sinhalese, and they have permanent positions and set salaries. The remaining 30% are Tamils and Muslims who are mostly employed on a temporary basis with salary levels not yet set.

Mahinda May Have the Advantage with Muslims

18. (U) Muslims in Ampara share Tamils' hopes for peace and prosperity, but--like elsewhere in the country--they are both more enthusiastic and more divided about the candidates than Tamils are. At a lunch meeting, a group of Muslims in Kalmunai told poloff that Muslims favor Rajapakse because they fear attacks from the LTTE if Wickremesinghe were to win. They pointed out that the UNP was in power in 1990 when the LTTE forced Muslims out of Jaffna, and that Wickremesinghe was Prime Minister in 2002 when the LTTE attacked Muslims in Mullaitivu and Mutur (on the northeastern coast) without government intervention. One Muslim noted that his compatriots supported Wickremesinghe's efforts with the Cease-Fire Agreement (CFA) in 2002 but were now disillusioned by the accord's deterioration. Interlocutors in Kalmunai estimated that 60-65% of Muslims in all of the North and East would vote for Rajapakse, while only slightly more than a third would follow Sri Lanka Muslim Congress leader Rauff Hakeem and support Wickremesinghe.

Comment

19. (C) Discussions in Ampara district revealed that even people who support a common goal--e.g. peace negotiations with the LTTE or better benefits for agriculture--have varying ideas about which candidate can best achieve that goal. The near-monolithic UNP support expressed by Tamils in Ampara district underscores the importance to Wickremesinghe of getting out the Tamil vote in the North and East--a prospect that appears increasingly tenuous (septel).
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